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# The Wounds of Dispossession: Displacement and Environmentally Induced Mental Illness in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

*I can see all that and be hurt by it, the way I was hurt by seeing things in the Army, in the war. The way I was hurt by seeing what happened to papa and the tribe. I thought I'd get over seeing those things and fretting over them. There's no sense in it. There's nothing to be done.*

—*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, 118

In 1962, Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, a narrative that emphasizes the interconnectedness of human and environment as it sheds light on the slow and continuous poisoning of both entities by the pesticide DDT, among other toxins and chemicals. Since its release, *Silent Spring* has been lauded as one of the most influential environmental works of the twentieth century and is often credited with prompting the environmental movement in the United States. Carson's illumination of the horrifying processes by which human bodies ultimately ingest toxins introduced into the environment gave rise to the concept of ecological health and ultimately engendered a new way of understanding the human relationship to the environment as reciprocal and interdependent.

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Published the same year as Carson's invaluable work, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* similarly posits a human interconnectedness to place and suggests that the devastating effects of damage to one entity—either environment or human—simultaneously wreak havoc on the other. Yet, it complicates and even augments Carson's thesis as it asserts environmental degradation potential to adversely affect not only the human body, but the human mind as well. While Carson conceives of environmental contaminants permeating the material human body, Kesey's approach asserts that such environmental assaults stand to impact the human mind, which we can at once interpret as matter and at the same time must recognize as something more complicated. Because his characters experience the degradation of their homeplace—from which they are ultimately displaced—and as a result suffer significant psychological harm, reading Kesey's novel in conjunction with Carson's contemporaneous work positions us to extend the traditional concept of environmental illness. It illustrates, in other words, the complex ways that harm inflicted on environments comes to bear on human bodies and minds.

As the novel presents the concurrent breakdown of environmental and human mental health among these prominent Native American figures in *Cuckoo's Nest*, it ultimately positions the state of one's homeplace and environmental surroundings as fundamental to human well-being, and suggests more broadly that the effects of environmental degradation on the human are more extensive than we have traditionally imagined. Specifically, the novel evidences the experience of environmentally induced mental illness through the psychological decline and eventual death of narrator Chief Bromden's father, Tee Ah Millatoona, or "The-Pine-That-Stands-Tallest-on-the-Mountain" (*Cuckoo's Nest* 188)—I will refer to him henceforth as "the elder Chief"—as well as the traumatic flashbacks of homeplace degradation and environmental exploitation that Chief Bromden—a.k.a. "the Chief"—himself experiences while on the Ward. The elder Chief's demise coincides with the damming of Celilo Falls on the Columbia River in Oregon, an actual event that occurred in 1957. The novel depicts the environmental and cultural degradation that results as traumatic for the elder Chief, and presumably the other members of the tribe. Furthermore, the Chief witnesses his father's breakdown, and is moreover disassociated from his homeplace by way of his time serving in the war and living on the ward; these experiences are also likely contributors to his own mental decline.

From the confines of the mental ward, the Chief narrates his experiences growing up in Celilo Village, and participating in the ancestral tradition of fishing at Celilo Falls, where he spent his childhood and

adolescent years developing his inherent fearless and carefree relationship with his home environment. When he recounts these stories of his childhood along the Columbia River, many years have passed; he has, at the least, done a tour of duty as a WWII serviceman, and had time to establish himself as a staple on the ward in the time between his displacement and the literary present. From this removed and somewhat nostalgic perspective, the Chief juxtaposes his undaunted childhood experience with his present mental state. He is now riddled with anxiety brought on by his displacement. "I used to be real brave around water when I was a kid on the Columbia," the Chief recollects (146). He even recalls obliviously standing up to the Government officials who came to scout the village for development, defending his traditional "dobe" house. He remembers exclaiming, "Our sod house is likely to be cooler than any of the houses in town, lots cooler!" (181). As a young child, the Chief could not fully comprehend what drove these agents' visits to the village, but he internalized his father's fears. He notes, "When I saw Papa start getting scared of things, I got scared too" (146). Eventually, the Chief recalls that his bravery dwindled. Instead of "[walking] the scaffolding around the falls with the other men, scrambling around with water roaring green and white all around [him] and the mist making rainbows," he "got so [he] couldn't even stand a shallow pool" (146). The trauma that accompanies the tribe's displacement is evident in the Chief's anxiety. Recounting his own breakdown from the Ward, he mourns his lost connection to place and positions his own mental decline in relation to the trauma he incurred as a witness to the defilement of his homeplace.

While critically, the Chief's psychological state is most often attributed to schizophrenia or war trauma (see Lupack), the desecration of his homeplace figures more prominently in his flashbacks and nightmares than war imagery and thus his tribe's and his own dispossession must figure into any comprehensive reading of his mental state. While he spent a portion of his childhood playfully interacting with his home environs, on the Ward the Chief is confined in what Ware calls "a chamber of tortures" (99) where he recalls not the idyllic Falls, nor the traditional lives of his fellow tribes people. Instead, he recounts "the men in the tribe who'd left the village in the last days to do work on the gravel crusher for the dam" in a "frenzied pattern, the faces hypnotized by routine" (35); he remembers how the U.S. Department of the Interior bore down on the village "like a gravel-crushing machine" (119); and he recollects his father's connection to homeplace and traditional ways dwindling: his father cannot "take down" a buck on a hunt, a feat that would usually take but one shot (119). The Chief's experiences with his homeplace's demise, as well as the associated

decline of his fellow tribespeople—and his own father in particular—all likely contribute to his own psychological ailments.

The Chief's flashbacks mirror the kind of episodes a veteran might experience as a result of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), yet these moments force him to relive not his wartime exposures but the precise symbol of industry that perpetuates he and his tribe's dispossession and displacement: the dam. During one of these episodes he explains, "It—everything I see—looks like it sounded, like the inside of a tremendous dam. Huge brass tubes disappear upward in the dark. Wires run to transformers out of sight. Grease and cinders catch on everything, staining the couplings and motors and dynamos red and coal black" (77). "There's a rhythm to it," says the Chief, "like a thundering pulse" (78). The tumultuous rhythm of the machine he recalls in this flashback suggests the overpowering and routine reality of postwar industrialism, which is endemic and inescapable, and has the power to destroy both the natural world and its inhabitants.

## WWII and the Ecology of Health

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* brought the truth about DDT to the attention of uninformed Americans. An insecticide first used to treat malaria and typhus at the end of WWII, the US government later used DDT as a contact poison to combat the defilement of agriculture by insects and arthropods. Federal interest in preserving agricultural production following the war led to indiscriminate dissemination of the chemical, and it is this practice with which Carson takes issue in *Silent Spring*. A concern for DDT's potential harm to not only the targeted environment but the entire biota inspired her to alert the public to the presence of this environmental pollutant and its potential effects on the ecosystem. Of course, as an integral part of any ecosystem, human beings and their health were at risk. Carson's text illuminates the dangers that these newly introduced and widely disseminated chemicals posed to human bodies, situating humans as not only agents, but also transcorporeal objects of change (Nash 7).

Carson's conception of ecological health led to major innovations in thinking about humans as part of the ecosystem. In her introduction to the 2002 edition of *Silent Spring*, Carson's biographer Linda Lear highlights the enormous consequences of this departure in thinking about the relationship between humans and the environment (xvi). As a result of *Silent Spring*, Americans began to understand the "endless cyclic transfer of materials from life to life," and to thus think of the health of humans and the environment as reciprocal and tenuous (Carson 46). Carson alerted her readership to the ways in which contaminants

cycled through ecosystems as she demonstrated that these chemicals not only affect their directed targets: “[they] [enter] both animal and human bodies, through air, water, soil, and complicated food chains” (Nash 157). In other words, she made clear that once pesticides enter the environment, they eventually infiltrate the material bodies of animals and humans alike. Environmental historian Linda Nash explains in *Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge* (2006) that in doing so Carson “portrayed human bodies as infinitely permeable and therefore as products of the landscapes that they inhabited” (158). Carson asked humans to reconsider their environments and to recognize the interdependence of ecological parts, which meant that degradation of the landscape would result in the degradation of human health within these ecosystems.

The effectiveness of Carson’s research and rhetorical methods motivated Americans to question their relationship to their environment, and the historical moment into which she launched her ecological polemic furthermore strengthened her argument’s force. Americans had been dealing with fears of nuclear fallout for nearly a decade when Carson published *Silent Spring*, and thus the public was primed to listen intently to her claims.<sup>1</sup> Her revelation of such silent threats as air pollution and pesticides resonated at this particular historical moment for it played on postwar atomic anxieties regarding radioactive fallout, as well as more recent fears—food contamination. Lutts explains,

[Carson] was sounding an alarm about a kind of pollution that was invisible to the senses; could be transported great distances, perhaps globally; could accumulate over time in body tissues; could produce chronic as well as acute poisoning; and could result in cancer, birth defects and genetic mutations that may not become evident until years or decades after exposure. (212)

Laypeople had been voicing similar concerns about fallout, contamination, and toxins for nearly a decade, and yet public health professionals and governmental representatives had typically dismissed their personal accounts. An overwhelming sense that exposure to chemicals and fallout posed serious health risks fed public anxieties, which continued to escalate, despite reassurance from the government. The “Guardians of Abundance” (Vail) who controlled postwar American agricultural systems, Carson concluded, were in fact responsible for inciting illness in and even death among American consumers, for poisonous toxins, chemicals, and pesticides were transmitted transcorporeally between the material of the environment and the

human. Carson confirmed the American people's fears with *Silent Spring*. The populous was primed to understand its underlying concepts and ready to reconsider definitions of health and illness as these terms related to bodies and the environment.

At the same time, *Cuckoo's Nest* launched its own critique, professing a parallel degree of skepticism regarding the forces that governed American behavior in the mid-twentieth century to that of *Silent Spring*. However, Kesey professed interest in the government's responsibility for Native American people's displacement and dispossession, as well as their resulting cultural, social, and physical/mental decline. *Cuckoo's Nest's* Native American characters are thus anything but incidental. Rather, they provide insights into the effects of environmentally induced mental illness at once through the elder Chief's fate, and the Chief's status as narrator, his illuminating flashbacks, and the lifting and resettling of a fog that represents the overbearing power of a postwar industrial, ecologically fragmented society on his mental well-being. The Big Nurse, with her tyrannical leverage over her patients, is most certainly an extension of what the Chief calls "the combine"—a symbol for postwar hyper-industrialization—and she provides a means by which the novel asks its audience to consider the detrimental effects of postwar governmentality and industrialization. Meanwhile, the Department of the Interior fulfills a similar role as it wreaks havoc on both the land and the interiority of Native American individuals who inhabit it in the name of "developing" the area's natural resources in order to bolster postwar industrial productivity (Ware 98). While the Big Nurse is the proximate source of the patients' struggles, as she harms rather than heals, the US Department of the Interior is ultimately responsible for the disintegration of Native American identity, sense of place and connection to environment, and mental health, or *interiority*.

### Kesey's Oregon Experience

*Cuckoo's Nest's* depictions of Native American issues, struggles, and traumas are rooted in Kesey's firsthand experience as a witness to the unjust treatment of Native Americans in the Pacific Northwest in the mid-twentieth century. Kesey grew up in Oregon's Willamette Valley, where he saw firsthand the mistreatment of Native Americans who had lived there for centuries. As a young man, his father would drive him three hundred odd miles northeast along the Columbia River Gorge to the Pendleton Roundup, which meant he often passed by The Dalles, Oregon and Celilo Falls, an ancient Native American fishing site on the Columbia River, just west of the Dalles. During Kesey's early trips to the Roundup he saw Native Celilo villagers wielding long



tridents and stabbing at Salmon that swam upstream to spawn (Faggan and Kesey 37). As time passed, however, these sightings became less frequent. At this point in time, “[the] government had bought out [Celilo] village, moved [its Native American inhabitants] across the road where they built new shacks for them” (Faggan and Kesey 37). Kesey was in fact a witness to the 1957 damming of Celilo Falls, along with the destruction and degradation of Native American communities and environments that came with it, a series of environmental acts that would later drive the composition of *Cuckoo’s Nest*.

The destruction of this major cultural site that Native American tribes<sup>2</sup> revered, coupled with the annihilation of what poet Elizabeth Woody of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs calls, “a multi-millennial relationship of people to a place,” was too much for many Celilo Villagers to bear (Barber 67). Kesey explains a particularly formative incident that he witnessed while taking the bus home from Pendleton. This incident illustrates the traumatic effects of displacement on Native residents of Celilo Village.

One time, as we got closer to this dam project, we were pulled over by the cops. We were in a big line of traffic. The bus driver got out and walked up to see what was happening. He came back and told us, ‘One of them crazy drunk Indians took a knife between his teeth and ran out into the highway and into the grill of an oncoming diesel truck, which was bringing conduit and piping to the dam project.’ I thought, ‘Boy that’s far out.’ Finally, he couldn’t take it anymore. He just had to grab his knife, go out into a freeway and run into a truck. (Faggan and Kesey 37–38)

Kesey himself interprets this event as “really the beginning of *Cuckoo’s Nest*” (Faggan and Kesey 38). His own reasoning suggests that this moment made him aware of “the notion of what you have to pay for a lifestyle” (Faggan and Kesey 38). According to Robert Faggan, in his introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962), this man was “willing to make the greatest sacrifice in honor of a way of life, a way of life no developer could buy from him” (xvi).

It is likely, however, that Kesey took something else from this incident. After all, the feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness, and violation in the face of the desecration of one’s homeplace can lead to serious mental illness, according to environmental philosophers and ecopsychologists. This scenario may have *in fact* demonstrated to Kesey the extent to which individual health and well-being relies on the health and well-being of one’s environment. As one’s homeplace is

degraded, this scenario suggests, feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness, and violation can occur, leading to a kind of environmental illness that damages not only the material self as it is traditionally conceived of, but an illness that disturbs the mind as well. Thus, although Kesey's experience with the effects this environmental act had on the Native Americans displaced by the flooding of their village was limited to one individual's suicide, he nonetheless incorporates the general sense of distress inherent in this suicide within his fictional account of Native American displacement and its effects.

The dispossession and displacement of Native Americans in Oregon and Washington, as Kesey understood them and treated them in *Cuckoo's Nest*, were the result of a very particular tradition of environmental understanding in the United States with roots in the nation's colonization, Westward expansion, and federal land management. The utilitarian motivations that resulted in the DOI's damming of Celilo Falls are indicative of the much wider-reaching, American conceptualization of national wildlands and natural areas. US wildlands were treasures, no doubt, but they were nonetheless available for exploitation under the right circumstances. Whether "wartime emergency" or some other scenario arose, the US government would make these lands available for use in the name of progress, efficiency, and/or democracy. Deserts were open to mining, forests to cutting, rangelands to grazing, and rivers to damming.

Of course, Celilo Falls and Village did not fall within national park boundaries and thus it was more vulnerable to manipulation. Additionally, this site's value was of little concern to a governmental agency whose environmental dealings were rooted in a long tradition of neglecting conservation in the name of preserving democracy, as opposed to preserving inherently valued environments. That is, national need for hydropower during the war eclipsed the need to conserve sites like Celilo Falls and Village. Thus, civic leaders began to install a system of hydroelectric dams along the Columbia River in order to, among other things, address the increased regional need for electricity following the war, and the Falls were a prime site for damming. The postwar Department of Defense required electricity for aluminum production, shipbuilding, and nuclear production at the nearby Hanford site.<sup>3</sup> Sites like Celilo Falls and Celilo Village were commodified, despite the Falls' incalculable value—tangible and intangible—to the native tribes who resided along the Columbia River. As Michael Hibbard notes, while inhabitants of Celilo Falls imbued the site with "a variety of tangible values as a source of livelihood (hunting, fishing, and gathering)" they also subscribed to its intangible values "of at least equal importance . . . belonging, attachment, beauty, and spirituality" (97). The



DOI's treatment of US internal affairs during the first half of the twentieth century thus sheds light on the novel's concern for Native American figures' *interiority* in lieu of environmental degradation and resulting environmentally induced traumas that trouble the novel's Chinook tribal members like the Chief. That the DOI was at once attentive to US internal affairs and at the same time oblivious to the internal, or mental, effects of their management policies and procedures points to capitalistic, economically driven environmental management, despite professed interest in preservation efforts during the mid-twentieth century.

### Psychoterratic Illness and the Ecological Unconscious

Environmental philosopher Glen Albrecht's conception of psychoterratic illness affords a lens through which to examine interchanges between the threatened environment and the declining mental states of Native American characters in *Cuckoo's Nest* who grapple with the government's encroachment and attempts to capitalize off their homeland. Albrecht, an expert in environmental illness, has introduced multiple forms of such illness but one is particularly useful in this case: *psychoterratic* illness ("psyche" = mental and "terratic" = earth related). Furthermore, his differentiation between his own coined term, "solastalgia," with *nostalgia*, allows for a new reading of the environmental thematics in *Cuckoo's Nest*. Of course, most of us are familiar with *nostalgia*, one of the only words in English that describes the links between the human mental state and environmental well-being. But *nostalgia* only encapsulates the phenomenon of environmentally induced distress occurring in displaced peoples. Literally, *nostalgia* means homesickness ("nostos" = return to native home or land and "algia" = pain or sickness). However, those who are not dispossessed and who seek solace in a homeplace that is under assault suffer from distress, anguish, or pain, as well. According to Albrecht, *solastalgia* ("sola" = solace and "algia" = pain or sickness) refers to the distress caused by a lack of solace or comfort derived from one's relationship to a home environment ("Distress" 95). He differentiates further between *solastalgia* and *nostalgia*, noting, "Solastalgia exists when there is recognition that the beloved place in which one resides is under assault [and this] can be contrasted to the spatial and temporal dislocation and dispossession experienced as nostalgia" ("Solastalgia" 35). Albrecht's terminology is helpful in that it suggests the limited nature of our traditional conceptions of environmental illness and its boundaries and as a result begs a more nuanced view of environmental illness.

Furthermore, the theories of late cultural critic, historian, and noted ecopsychologist, Theodore Roszak, support the conception of environmental illness as the bodily *and* mental phenomenon that *Cuckoo's Nest* suggests. While environmental and ecological psychology continued to profess interest in utilizing ecological metaphor to study perception and action, Roszak—who had no background in either field and generally positioned himself as skeptical of scientific expertise—brought ecology to bear on psychology when he professed in *Person/Planet* (1978) that “the needs of the planet and the needs of the person have become one” (xiv). He advanced the field of ecopsychology, which he explains in *Voice of the Earth* (1992), is an attempt to reconnect the individual with his or her “ecological unconscious” (13). According to Roszak, this ecological unconscious is a primordial human need—dating back to our distant human conditions; ecological reciprocity is necessary he argues, as opposed to the alienation between humans and their natural environments that results from the spread of technological progress and scientific ethos (*Voice of the Earth* 320). He notes that there is an “interplay between planetary and personal well-being” and that the planet’s needs match the person’s needs, while the person’s rights extend to the planet (*Voice of the Earth* 320). Roszak thus anticipates an entire line of existing inquiry that spans multiple disciplines<sup>4</sup> as he asserts that the health of the psyche depends on the health of the natural environment.

*Cuckoo's Nest* highlights the exigent nature of fulfilling this primordial, unconscious drive to connect with healthy natural environment, and to achieve ecological reciprocity, by imagining the resultant psychological suffering of Native American characters, who are dispossessed and displaced from their revered environs. The novel furthermore critiques the system that enforces this divide between humans and healthy natural systems, and suggests the potentially devastating outcomes associated with the forced repression of one’s ecological unconscious, or simply the failure to engage it adequately. This kind of repression, *Cuckoo's Nest* illustrates, results in illness, anxiety, and even forms of madness. Treating such ailments thus requires the proper reconciliation of the ecological being and his or her environment. The demise of Chief Bromden’s father in particular serves as a compelling example of the ways in which the destruction of a particular environment can induce mental illness in individuals who call the environment in question “home.” The significance of Tee Ah Millatoona’s psychological demise cannot be understated, for when the Chief finally breaks his silence nearly two hundred pages into the novel, it is to explain how the US government pressured his father to sign over the tribe’s land, the Falls, and the surrounding area so that

the Department of the Interior could construct a hydroelectric dam (Kesey 188). The elder Chief experiences both physical and mental duress as a result of these attempts to acquire his tribe's land. The Chief explains, "the Combine worked on him for years" until it "whipped him" (Kesey 188–89). Not only is the elder Chief physically assaulted in an alley, his hair cut short by his assailants in an act symbolizing the stripping away of Native American culture, he is metaphysically beaten as well (Kesey 188).

The government's intimidation wears on the elder Chief mentally and he finally succumbs to the pressure. As critic Elaine Ware notes, the Chief sees his father as "a changed man" (96). His father becomes fearful, insecure, and submissive. And then, "He finally just drank" (Kesey 189). The Chief continues, describing his father's demise:

And the last I see him he's blind in the cedars from drinking and every time I see him put the bottle to his mouth he don't suck out of it, it sucks out of him until he's shrunk so wrinkled and yellow even the dogs don't know him, and we had to cart him out of the cedars, in a pickup, to a place in Portland, to die. I'm not saying they kill. They didn't kill him. They did something else. (189)

Governmental interests have led to severe degradation of the tribe's home environment, and concomitantly of his father's welfare. As a result, the Chief sees his father's great size decreasing. The elder Chief no longer lives up to his name, "the Pine that Stands Tallest on the Mountain." Instead, as his homeland degenerates, so too does his physicality and his mental stability. While there is little doubt that a loss of traditional ways of life contributes to the elder Chief's downfall, more than tradition and cultural identity are at stake. As a larger, predominantly white culture encroaches, impeding Native American ways of life, it furthermore exploits the land's resources, degrades Native homeplace, and inflicts associated traumas, which serve as a major factor in the elder Chief's demise.

### The Fog of Postwar American Culture

The elder Chief's environmentally induced mental illness advances *Cuckoo's Nest's* professed interest in the extent to which environmental and human psychological health are interrelated, however, the novel attends in a more sustained way to the Chief's own psychological deterioration in lieu of his home environment's degradation, and the advancement of hyper-industrial forces in the postwar era. We can trace the Chief's struggles by attending to the motif of the fog that the Chief

imagines in various accounts throughout the novel. The seemingly real fog, which the Chief in fact hallucinates, represents the industrial-scientific system's control and thus, like the dam and the ward, it extends the breach between human and ecological system with which Roszak argues he/she yearns and needs to engage. After all, the fog disrupts the Chief's senses, preventing any phenomenological perception of his environment. The first time the Chief recounts for his audience his experience with the fog, he has been hiding in a broom closet, where he recollects his home environment. "[I] try to get my thoughts off somewhere else—try to think back and remember things about the village and the big Columbia River, think about ah one time Papa and I were hunting birds in a stand of cedar trees near the Dalles. . . But like always when I try to place my thoughts in the past and hide there, the fear close at hand seeps in through the memory" (6). Like the bird the Chief recalls hunting, which he notes remained "safe as long as he [kept] still," the Chief springs from the closet in fear and is intercepted by the orderlies who drag him away screaming so that they can enact their Monday ritual of shaving his face. This is when the fog emerges and, as the Chief explains, "turns me on so loud it's like no sound, everybody yelling at me hands over their ears from behind a glass wall, faces working around in talk circles but no sound from the mouths. My sound soaks up all other sound" (7). "I cannot see six inches in front of me through the fog," he adds. The Chief screams and "hollers" until they gag him. It is only after he wakes from this episode that the fog has cleared and he can see again (8). From this early instance, it is clear that the fog maintains the schism between the Chief and his attempts at ecological reconnection.

Of course, the Chief has experienced the fog for years. The humming, clicking, rattling, jerking sounds of the ward are like those of a cotton mill the Chief recalls, which he visited while he was in California to play in a high school football game (34). This mill also reminds him of the gravel crusher for the dam that displaced his people. Just as the industrial routine hypnotizes these men (35), the mill puts the Chief "in kind of a dream" (34). There is a connection between the ward, the mill, the dam, and the technocratic, industrial system more generally. All are one in the same in that they induce this fog—as does the medication and electroshock therapy treatments that the Big Nurse forces on her patients—that keeps the Chief from being able to act on the ecological unconscious that drives him, and thus they perpetuate his repression and even further, his mental instability.

The fog's appearance is, however, not limited to moments in which the Chief is on the verge of ecological reconnection. The Chief's encounters with the fog also lead him to suggest that it is a mechanism

employed by the Big Nurse and the Combine. In other words, he positions the fog as an arm of the technocratic, industrial system that reinforces hopelessness in moments that suggest there might be potential to “whip” the Big Nurse or “beat” the Combine, thus enabling the Chief and the other patients on the ward to break free of a system of control and constraint. In one instance, the doctor on the ward endorses McMurphy’s idea of opening up a second day room (98). McMurphy seems to command the doctor as the doctor relays suggestions to the Big Nurse; McMurphy “gives a modest wave of his hand, and the doctor nods at him and goes on” (97). Although the Chief thinks “for a minute there I saw her whipped,” he realizes “it don’t make any difference” because “she’s lost a little battle here today, but it’s a minor battle in a big war that she’s been winning and that she’ll go on winning” (100). In her momentary defeat, suggests the Chief, the Big Nurse switches on the fog machine. He begins to feel “hopeless and dead” because “nothing can be helped” (100).

The next time the Chief mentions the fog it is to reference its absence, which frees the Chief to initiate a new relationship with the surrounding environment. “I was seeing lots of things different,” he notes, adding, “I figured the fog machine had broken down in the walls when they turned it up high for that meeting on Friday, so now they weren’t able to circulate fog and gas and foul up the way things looked. For the first time in years I was seeing people with none of that black outline they used to have, and one night I was even able to see out the windows” (140). Later that night, the Chief awakes and, sensing the fall coming on, yearns to “do something” (141). He walks to an open window and here, with his eyes closed out of fear, he smells the breeze: “I can smell that sour-molasses smell of silage, clanging the air like a bell—smell somebody’s been burning oak leaves, left them to smolder overnight because they’re too green” (Kesey 141). While he is, as he explains, initially too scared to look outside, he nonetheless *knows* things about the state of the environment, less than a hundred miles from his home: the season, the particular species of tree whose leaves someone is burning, that these leaves have only begun to turn. His ecological unconscious is awakening. Bromden seems to see something of himself in a “mongrel dog” out in the yard, a dog hat has “slipped off . . . to find out about things went on after dark” (142). The Chief, too, has an interest in finding out such things: with the rest of the ward sleeping, he can watch, listen, and reconnect to the world beyond the ward as he prepares to literally break through its walls (142). The dog in this scene runs toward the road as a car approaches, but we do not learn whether the two collide, for the nurses find the Chief and return him to bed.

In order to escape and reconnect with the environment from which he has been disconnected and is now keenly aware of, the Chief must literally uproot the control panel, which over the course of the novel has represented the unmovable force of the system that constrains the patients on the ward. "[W]ith dials and buttons on it, [that the Big Nurse sets on] some kind of automatic pilot to run things while she's away," (38) the panel taunts the patients who dream of one day exerting their own powerful forces of dissent upon it, in a symbolic act of resistance to a system that keeps them suppressed and subdued. It is of little surprise that the novel's protagonist, R.P. McMurphy, is the only one who dares to try, for his role in the novel is to oppose the system in any way he can. McMurphy is a Korean War veteran, who was discharged for subordination. In a characteristic act of subversion, after being convicted on counts of gambling, battery, and statutory rape, he declares himself insane so that he can serve his prison sentence in what he imagines will be relative ease and comfort. McMurphy unsurprisingly clashes with the Big Nurse and attempts—successfully, for a time—to thwart her suppression of the patients on the ward. In a moment that foreshadows McMurphy's ultimate defeat, despite the enormous amount of force McMurphy exerts, however, he cannot lift the panel; in fact, it leaves him maimed and bleeding. The Chief explains that when he begins to lift, McMurphy's "arms commence to swell, and the veins squeeze up to the surface," while his "head leans back, and tendons stand out like coiled ropes running from his heaving neck down both arms to his hands," and "his whole body shakes with the strain as he tries to lift something he *knows* he can't lift, something *everybody* knows he can't lift" (110). McMurphy cannot uproot the panel and defeat the system, but the Chief can. For all of his attempts to undermine the system, it ultimately defeats McMurphy, whose motivations—revolution, namely—leave us wondering what productive ends he might pursue in the world beyond the ward. On the other hand, the Chief's ecological unconscious drives him to not only subvert the system through this symbolic act, but to deny its control over his ecological inclinations in the name of seeking out ecologically ethical ways of being in the world. In the end, the Chief takes figurative control of the machine, the Combine, the dam, the mill, and all other manifestations of the power that have displaced and dispossessed him. He then hurls it through the window in an act that suggests the system has lost its grip on him, and that he is finally prepared to do whatever is necessary to restore his ecological unconscious to a healthy state.



Nonetheless, when the Chief breaks out of the ward at the novel's end, we cannot know whether a fated collision is in store, just as we cannot know what happened to the dog, whose behavior and actions parallel those of the Chief, and thus whose situation foreshadows his own (280). After all, the dog likely has a place to which he may return; the Chief, however, does not. His homeplace has been submerged by the dam, his people dispossessed by governmental systems of power. All we know is that he will likely "stop along the Columbia on the way" to see "if there's any of the guys [he] used to know . . . who haven't drunk themselves goofy" out of hopelessness, fear, madness (280). Whether he finds a place for himself there, remains to be seen. He seems to acknowledge the unlikelihood of the return's permanence. The Chief's hope, he tells us in the novel's final lines, is merely to—after a long time away—"look over the country around the gorge again, just to bring some of it clear in my mind again" (281). That the Chief's ultimate desire is to bring his homeland "clear in [his] mind" leaves little doubt that his disconnection from place has been the source of his trauma, and that restoration in some form of his own ecological being with this environment will provide him with relief and, we hope, rehabilitation.

### *Cuckoo's Nest* and the Material Turn

*Cuckoo's Nest* represents the decline of environments as affecting those who inhabit them and thus positions Ken Kesey as a forerunner who quite early on recognized the abysmal ecological conditions that proliferated in American society, specifically within the Pacific Northwest region. Kesey and his novel deserve a place within the larger contemporary discussions of human–ecosystemic relationships, for *Cuckoo's Nest* at once fictionally addresses certain concepts that ecocritical scholars have as of late come to theorize—such as ecological bodies, transcorporeality, and environmentally induced mental illness, to name a few; positions the crucial nature of material beings' interconnectedness to material environments; and suggests that enacting an ecocritical turn to environmental illness, psychoterratic illness, and the ecological mind can even further develop understandings of the full range of humanity's material relationship to environment. Literature and ecocritical engagements with it can provide rich sources for investigating the phenomenon of environmentally induced mental illness. Ecocriticism has important insights to offer the environmental and social sciences in this way. That is, it emphasizes fictional narrative's potential to make significant interventions into the material world, for the literary form of the novel allows authors to imagine an

interrelationship between embodied mind, ecological body, and material environment.

The evidence of associated environmental and mental degradation in *Cuckoo's Nest* furthermore positions the novel as deserving of renewed attention and credit within the critical discussions of environmental materiality and agency. After all, the novel illuminates the dire consequences of subscribing to what Jane Bennett, author of *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), calls "the fantasy that 'we' really are in charge of all of those 'its'—its that . . . reveal themselves to be potentially forceful agents" (x). Bennett, along with Stacy Alaimo and other material ecocritical scholars, deconstruct the all-too-prevalent assumption that the material world is passive and inert (Bennett vii). Bennett asserts as her theoretical project the encouragement of humans to recognize their material surroundings as possessing a vitality and agency, or in her own words, "giving force of things more due," in order to alter political responses to public problems (vii). She asks us to consider a series of rhetorical possibilities:

How . . . [might] patterns of consumption change if we faced not litter, rubbish, trash, or 'recycling,' but an accumulating pile of lively and potentially dangerous matter? What difference would it make to public health if eating was understood as an encounter between various and variegated bodies, some of them mine, most of them not, and none of which always gets the upper hand? What issues would surround stem cell research in the absence of the assumption that the only source of vitality in matter is a soul or spirit? What difference would it make to the course of energy policy were electricity to be figured not simply as a resource, commodity, or instrumentality but also and more radically as an 'actant'? (Bennett viii)

Interpreting the Native American figures in *Cuckoo's Nest* as able to both affect and *be affected by* their environments in the way Bennett describes positions the novel to raise similar and equally important questions, which apply in a much broader sense to myriad sociohistorically and regionally positioned individuals.

In order to position Kesey's characters' transcorporeally, however, we must sufficiently attend the mind's materiality. Alaimo's conception of transcorporeality, which she introduces in *Bodily Natures*, can point us in this direction. Transcorporeality renders itself most effective when Alaimo treats that the brain itself as a "material place" that "casts being and knowing, liquids and nerves, within substantial networks" (69),

which she does in her reading of Percival Everett's *Watershed* (1996). Moreover, she asserts multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) as a material illness that has both biological and psychological effects, for toxic agents have the potential to affect brain functions, moods, and emotions (126). Transcorporeality then allows for a sustained material reading of *Cuckoo's Nest*, as the novel suggests that the material environment acts not only on human bodies, but furthermore on human *minds*, and thus on behaviors, conducts, and epistemologies. This novel enacts Alaimo's transcorporeal vision. Ultimately, it moreover stands to advance the environmental ethic that material ecocritical and posthumanist scholars alike embrace, which asks us to resist the ideologies that unrelentingly alienate us from the natural world, and reposition the human–environment relationship as co-constitutive and thus as requiring respect, reverence, and responsibility.

## NOTES

1. It should be noted that Carson's ideas were not necessarily revolutionary, for as Nash notes, ecological understandings of the human body have a long history; Carson had merely articulated existing concepts in new ways (1). Nash notes that "strange and familiar" health concerns date back centuries (5). Early colonizers feared particular climates for the effects these climates might have on their corporeal selves, for instance. The industrial revolution cultivated similar fears in nineteenth-century Americans who feared miasma as producing fever and other illness (Nash 5).

2. These tribes include the Yakama, Warm Springs, Umatilla, Nez Perce, and others.

3. The Hanford nuclear production complex was originally constructed to support plutonium research for the Manhattan Project and was later expanded—the site originally hosted three reactors, which soon became nine—during the Cold War to meet the threat of the Soviet nuclear weapons program.

4. Science has struggled and still struggles to determine the ways in which one's material environment and the treatment of it can affect one's mental health. For example, in the field of ecopsychology, more contemporary notions of "Nature-Deficit Disorder," and advancements in cognitive science seek to understand the innate, emotional affiliation of human beings and other living organisms, which famed scientist E.O. Wilson has suggested by way of his biophilia hypothesis (165). Furthermore, current studies in neuroscience and physics seek to understand, respectively, how exposure to chemicals can result in cognitive disorders (Grandjean and Landrigan 330) and how consciousness can be understood as a state of matter (Tegmark).

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